

STORY AND PHOTO BY STAFF SGT. BENNIE J. DAVIS III

# SEOUL SURVIVOR

**M**aking my way back to the Incheon International Airport, I couldn't believe how 10 days flew by so quickly. Time, like everything else in South Korea, seems to move at a fast pace.

It was my first trip to the "Land of the Morning Calm" and I was really excited. Seoul was high on my top 10-places-I-want-to-see-before-I-die list. I wasn't disappointed.

Apart from the general excitement of traveling to South Korea, there are a few things that will stick with me about my trip.

I was part of an Air Force news team that traveled there in mid-September to report on a group of Korean War veterans returning to the country for the Air Force's 60th anniversary. For most of the eight veterans, 50-plus years had passed since they last set eyes on the peninsula.

Our assignment was to shadow two flying "aces" in the group, while also focusing daily stories on the other heroes from the "Forgotten War." One of those in the group was retired Col. Buzz Aldrin, Apollo XI astronaut and the second man to walk on the moon. Meeting Colonel Aldrin was one of the pleasurable highlights

of the trip. It's not every day you get to talk about photography on the moon with the man who had his picture taken there. The colonel is a captivating human being. His passion for space travel and exploration hasn't faded since his lunar landing, and even in South Korea he did his part to market future endeavors.

Colonel Aldrin has a sense of urgency in his voice when he speaks about America's future in space. He's worried the United States may lose its grip on aerospace advancement if it doesn't take action in the next few years to get back to the moon, and even to Mars. He said our country seems to have lost interest in the great beyond.

And it's sad that our astronauts — true American heroes — are now D-list celebrities, giving way to the antics of pops singers and the accompanying Hollywood drama.

I guess you could say the same about most of the heroes on the trip, men who fought to keep South Korea free in a war many Americans have forgotten or know nothing about.

One thing that impressed me is that Koreans haven't forgotten their heroes — or ours. Young and old

alike treated our veterans with bows, smiles, handshakes and pleasantries for their sacrifices. It was an honor to see the rock-star treatment provided to men who truly deserve it.

One of the best things I witnessed was the reunion of two old friends. Col. Hal Fischer, a double ace during the war, met Don Kruger, his F-86 Sabre bomb loader, for the first time in 54 years. They met by chance, while on a tour of the Demilitarized Zone, of all places.

We traveled around South Korea by land and air. It's an amazing country. But our distinguished veterans told me this land of plenty was once nothing but rubble and despair. Looking at the way the country has flourished, that's hard to believe.

Seoul is unlike any other city I've been to. It never sleeps. It's like a human ant farm, from the above-ground, eight-lane downtown streets to the seemingly endless subway lines. And everyone seemed to be on a focused mission. I also saw the beauty of Koreans dressed in traditional garments — a stark contrast to the city's crowded and chaotic back streets.

The people of South Korea survived the war and have prospered. And I believe one day they will have a unified nation again. There's no doubt in my mind the contributions and sacrifices made by our veterans gave South Koreans the determination to thrive.

Seeing first hand South Korea's rise from the ashes makes me realize anything is possible.



Nau Un-ran, a 20-year-old art student studying photography, wears a dangui, a traditional South Korean dress. The dress of many colors provides a stark contrast to the grimy back streets of Seoul's busy Yongsan entertainment district.

